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YOUTH SOCIALIZATION VIA NATIONAL SERVICE

BY DONALD J. EBERLY

FEBRUARY 1978

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YOUTH SOCIALIZATION VIA NATIONAL SERVICE

BY DONALD J. EBERLY

As a frame of reference for this paper, I have chosen the keynote address given by our chairman a year ago to the Society for Experiential Education. At that time, Harry Silberman put forward "five major arguments against using work experience as a vehicle for socialization to adulthood." They were in brief:

1. Legislative support for work experience programs derives much more from a desire to reduce unemployment than from a desire to assist in the maturation of young people. Consequently, publicly-supported work experience programs tend to push young people into jobs that don't lead anywhere.
2. The isolation of young people from society is not a problem; the problem was the Vietnam War and the over-reaction of adults to youthful behavior.
3. The targeting of work experience programs on disadvantaged groups only serves to reinforce their identity with the disadvantaged and to doom many participants to a lifetime of boring jobs or no jobs.
4. Work experience advocates are too soft on young people, stressing the rights of young people at the expense of their responsibilities.
5. Any kind of large-scale work experience program will be too costly and will be resisted by union leaders, employers, parents, teachers and students.

These are important concerns. Proponents of work experience programs should have answers to them. I shall return to them in a few minutes. First I want to describe an experimental youth program which did provide a set of answers to these and other questions about youth programs.

The program I am referring to did not originate as a work experience project, nor as a socialization of youth project, nor as an educational project. Yet it was all of these. It had its origins in the concept of national service, the idea that the nation has a responsibility to its future to encourage and enable young people to serve on the frontiers of human needs, and young people have a responsibility to their heritage to contribute a period of time to meeting human needs. ACTION wanted to learn the demographic profile of persons who applied to the program, the value of service they performed, and what types of benefits accrued to the participants.

In 1973, with a one million dollar grant from ACTION to Washington State, one-page application forms were sent to all eighteen-to-twenty-five year olds in the area who held motor vehicle licenses. Applications reached at least three-quarters of the target population, while others learned of the program from friends and relatives, youth organizations and media announcements. The program was labeled Program for Local Service (PLS). Despite the publicity, however, a follow-up study found that only about one young person in five was aware of the opportunity to apply.

Approximately 10 percent of the "aware" population did apply for PLS, and while they represented all segments of the eighteen-to-twenty-five age group, they did not comprise an exact profile of the youthful population. Three out of five applicants were women. One out of five was from a minority group whereas only one in seven young people in the Seattle area is from a minority group. Rather surprisingly, PLS applicants were somewhat better educated than the average and also came from families of less than average income. One high school dropout and one college graduate could be found among every seven PLS applicants. The remaining five had completed high school and some of them had attended college. The most common characteristic of PLS applicants was their employment status. Seven out of ten were unemployed and looking for work, a proportion estimated to be at least twice as high as that of eighteen-to-twenty-five year olds in the Seattle area at that time.

How did these proportions shift as some applicants became PLS participants and others did not? They didn't change at all. The profile of PLS participants was not significantly different in any way from the profile of PLS applicants. A major reason for the absence of any shift was the involvement of several dozen people as brokers or "matchmakers" who were on call to assist the applicant and the prospective sponsor in understanding PLS and in working out details of the agreement between the two. Matchmakers were especially useful to younger applicants, those without work experience and those who were mentally retarded or otherwise handicapped.

PLS participants received $2970 for their year of service, approximately 10 percent below the minimum wage at that time. They performed a wide variety of services; helping an old lady fix a clothesline; caring for a person with an epileptic seizure; giving weekly physical therapy treatments to sixteen people at the Fircrest State School dor the Mentally Deficient; involving youthful first offenders in a mini-bike program designed to build a sense of responsibility and self-worth; and serving as advocates for new clients at the United Cerebral Palsy Association.

Overall, the work of the PLS participants was evenly divided between public agencies and nonprofit organizations in the private sector. The field of education claimed 25 percent of the participants whle mental health, other health services, crime and protection, and recreation each claimed approximately 10 percent. The remaining 35 percent were engaged in a variety of social services. PLS also served a wide range of clients although special projects tended to emphasize children and youth, low-income and handicapped people, the elderly, criminal offenders and women.

When we examine the outcomes of PLS against the Silberman arguments, this is what we find:

1. PLS was designed primarily as a service program, not as a jobs program and not as a maturation program. Still, we were interested in the secondary effects of PLS and the evidence available is positive for both jobs and maturation. The unemployment rate fell from 70% to 18%, and many participants obtained jobs with their sponsors. Also, PLS participants were found to ascend their career ladders at twice the normal rate.

2. PLS did contribute to increasing the awareness of the participants about the needs of the poor.
3. PLS was not a targeted program, even though the majority of participants could have qualified for the Neighborhood Youth Corps. Participants were seen as members of a youth service program rather than a "jobs for needy youth" program.
4. Firm discipline was exercised in PLS. Participants who gave evidence of an unwillingness to serve were counseled and ultimately, 12% were fired from the program. One percent of the sponsors was fired for not living up to the agreement.
5. The present cost of PLS would be about $6300 per work year. There is, of course, resistance to any new program. National service can evolve as a supplement to other youth programs, and replace them only if and when it proves itself more effective.

Lest I give the impression of PLS as a panacea, there are several changes to be made before its full potential is realized.

First, as a temporary program, it holds out no hope for children and young teen-agers. This absence of hope is a major cause of the anti-social behavior of students in the upper primary and secondary school years. If they were able to count on doing something useful and getting paid for it and being treated the equal of any other young person, the chances are that many would improve their behavior and finish high school.

Second, participation in national service could help restore the rights and responsibilities part of the youth socialization process. As already cited with PLS, both young people and sponsors should be expected to uphold their agreements and ultimately be dropped from the program if they don't. We should also look carefully at educational entitlements. With a few billion dollars each year committed to Federal aid for higher education, to what extent should we set aside some of that money for persons who have completed a year or more in national service? Scholarships used to be awarded largely on the basis of intellectual potential or affiliation. Then they were awarded mostly on the basis of financial need. At a time of limited resources, it seems appropriate to define a place for establishing an educational incentive for those who contribute a period of national service.

Third, opportunities for national service have to be made truly universal. It is OK to screen Peace Corps Volunteers because the United States vouches for their commitment and competence. Domestic national service is all in the family. Every year some four million Americans turn 18. Most of them have as a primary activity work, school, housekeeping, military service, or unemployment. The addition of a national service option would probably draw most heavily from the ranks of the unemployed, and would also attract some of those in school and elsewhere. If national service had been in effect in the U.S.

for several years, I estimate that about one-quarter of the eligible population would enter. Today that would mean an enrollment of approximately one million 18-24 year olds.

Fourth, national service should offer a greater diversity of activities than were found in PLS. While PLS participants had the option of designing their own service projects, very few actually did so. There should be opportunities in cultural and conservation projects, in public works, and in human need areas not being addressed by any institution.

National service as described above holds a great deal of promise as a youth program that would help to socialize young people without conformity. Participants would know that they were needed by society, yet they would have the freedom to serve in a wide variety of endeavors.

A barrier to the creation of national service has been its multi-purpose nature. In my view, national service can be justified solely as a service program, or a work experience program, or an educational program, or a youth development program. In order to get out of these boxes, an holistic perspective is needed. A National Youth Commission might be one way to obtain this perspective.

A full-blown National Youth Commission would have in its purview the full range of youth concerns from education to work experience to military service to delinquent behavior. Some nations, especially developing countries, have Ministries of Youth to deal with this array of concerns at the Cabinet level. While it is conceivable that the United States might eventually have a Department of Youth, and while this proposal would not limit

the concern of the Commission to youth employment only, it is suggested that the Commission focus on youth employment and areas closely related to this topic.

More specifically the Commission could have five basic functions. It could:

Evaluate present youth programs,

Conduct research on youth development and participation,

Experiment with possible youth initiatives,

Act as a forum for the coordination of youth programs, and

Make recommendations relating to a national youth policy.

Evaluation

As a disinterested evaluator of present youth programs, the Commission would produce for the first time the data needed to permit direct comparision among programs. It would insist on comparable age cohorts and would employ comparable measures of program costs and output. It would also explore the side effects, whether positive or negative. For example, in each of the several programs supported by YEDPA the Commission would assess:

- The value of the work or serviceperformed by youthful participants, by category (Energy conservation, health, housing, etc.)
- The extent to which regular employees were displaced by youthful participants,
- The extent to which new jobs were created, and the subsequent funding source for such jobs,

- The effect of participation on employability,
- The temporary and long term effect on youth employment,
- The learning (skill training, problem solving, working with people) acquired by youthful participants,
- The effect on crime and delinquency, and
- Direct and indirect program costs.

The matrix of comparable evaluation data across programs should produce some discoveries. It might show, for example, that more pertinent skill training is acquired from work experience programs than from job training programs. Or it might reveal that certain types of job training programs produce more energy conservation than service programs aimed at conserving energy.

The matrix will also greatly reduce the time lag between evaluation and decision making. Typically, by the time a program is evaluated for a certain purpose, that purpose is no longer a high priority and the evaluation is disregarded. The matrix will permit sound decisions to be made on new priorities.

Research:

The research branch of the Commission should first of all be a clearinghouse of information on youth research. In this respect the Commission could assume the lead role in supporting the Interagency Committee on Research in Adolescence. This activity should be extended by developing linkages to the University of Minnesota and other places where youth research is conducted. Also, it should much more actively inform the public of findings in youth research.

Once the Commission has a good sense of what is going on in youth research, it can develop a program to fill in the gaps.

Experimentation:

Emphasis here should be on projects which cut across departmental lines. A good example, and the one recommended for the first test, is the GI Bill for National Service, which would provide education and training entitlements to persons who serve in the Peace Corps, VISTA, Young Adult Conservation Corps, and other Federally supported programs in YEDPA or elsewhere designated by the Commission.

Typically the Commission would support no more than two or three such programs at a time. The tests should be of sufficient scale that the next step would be national replication if successful. Small scale tests can be conducted under the headings of research.

Forum:

It is important to note the distinction between providing a forum for coordination and having the power to coordinate youth programs. So long as major youth programs are housed in different units of government, the latter would be very difficult to achieve in practice. A forum, on the other hand, would offer a non-threatening environment where ideas and problems and progress may be discussed. Over a period of a few years such a forum should lead to a better articulation among youth programs.

As a more general type of forum the Commission would also convene meetings and conferences on the subject of youth. The conduct of the decennial White House Conference on Youth could be assigned to the Commission.

Recommendations:

The Commission would make recommendations to the President, the Congress, the public, based on its research, evaluation, testing

and forum activities. These could be made at any time and would be included in the Commission's annual report.

The President could also stipulate topics and deadlines for Commission recommendations. The greater the specificity of the assignments, the tougher and more controversial will be the work of the Commission. But it will also be more realistic.

Consider three possible assignments:

1. "Prepare the broad outlines of a national youth policy."
2. "Examine the national youth service concept and make recommendations."
3. "Devise and test a system which guarantees, but does not require summer work or service positions for all 14-17 year olds and one-year work or service positions for all 18-24 year olds."

The first will produce platitudes and polite debate. The second will produce debate but little action. The third will produce action.

The Board of Commissioners would include the Secretaries of Interior, Commerce, HEW, Labor, HUD, Agriculture, the Directors of ACTION and CSA, leading private sector figures in education and other youth areas, and several young people. The Commissioner would be appointed by and report to the President, who would designate the Chairperson.

A core budget of $10 to $20 million would provide for four of the Commission's functions: evaluation, research, forum and recommendations, The fifth function, experimentation, would normally require a larger budget since it would conduct experiments at the level between pilot projects and nationwide implementation. For example, a proper test of the GI Bill for National Service would reqire about $100 million.

It is a weakness of the United States today that it does not demonstrate a faith in young people of the kind expressed by Eleanor Roosevelt and Hubert Humphrey. It seems clear that an educational process is needed. A National Youth Commission would be the proper vehicle for the process. It could lead us to the day when the nation may expect young people to be responsible citizens, because the nation has first fulfilled its responsibility to young people.